



“These things shape the soul”

May 4, 1999

Testimony delivered May 4, 1999, before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good morning. I know our time is limited, and your work is important, so forgive me if I'm very direct.

Exactly one week ago today, I buried the third of four Catholic teen-agers shot to death at Columbine High School. More than a thousand people turned out for each of the funerals. Other pastors, from other churches, did exactly the same for the other eight students and the teacher who were murdered. They had exactly the same experience. These killings broke the heart of my community. You may not know Littleton — but I do. It's a good place, with good people. However terrible the Columbine tragedy seemed on TV, it's another thing altogether to sit privately with parents as they learn that the child they kissed goodbye yesterday won't be coming home again — ever. For their sake, I'm grateful to be here.

The discussion today is “marketing violence to children.” I'd like to offer just two observations from a pastor's point of view.

First, as a nation, we've lost our common sense, and we urgently need to recover it. The reasonable person understands that what we eat, drink and breathe will make us healthy or sick. In like manner, what we hear and what we see lifts us up — or drags us down. It *forms us inside*. Pornography degrades women. It also coarsens men. I don't need to prove that, because we all know it. It's common sense.

The weekend after the Columbine killings, I saw a film called *The Matrix* with a friend. The theater was filled with teen-agers. One scene left me completely stunned: The heroes wear trench coats, and in a violent, elegant, slow-motion bloodbath, they cut down about a dozen people with their guns. It occurred to me that Mr. Harris and Mr. Klebold may have seen that film. If so, it certainly didn't deter them.

My point is this: People of religious faith have been involved in music, art, literature and architecture for thousands of years because we know — from experience — that these things shape the soul. And through the soul, they shape behavior. The roots of violence in our culture are much more complicated than just bad rock lyrics or brutal screenplays. And it's clear that the Columbine killings were planned well before *The Matrix* ever opened. But common sense tells us that the violence of our music, our video games, our films and our television has to go somewhere — and it goes straight into the hearts of our children, to bear fruit in ways we can't imagine . . . until something like Littleton happens.

My second observation is this: Blaming shock-rock performers like Marilyn Manson for the violence in our culture is easy. It's also, in a way, probably right. But the problem of violence isn't *out there* in bad music and bloody films. The real problem is *in here*, in us, and it won't be fixed by v-chips. In the last four decades, we've created a culture that markets violence in *dozens* of different ways, seven days a week. It's part of our social fabric. When we build our advertising campaigns on consumer selfishness and greed, and when money becomes the universal measure of value, how can we be surprised when our sense of community erodes? When we glorify and multiply guns, why are we shocked when kids use them?

When we answer murder with more violence in the death penalty, we put the state's seal of approval on reveng

e. When the most dangerous place in the country is a mother's womb, and the unborn child can have his or her head crushed in an abortion, even in the process of being born . . . the body language of that message is that life isn't sacred and may not be worth much at all. In fact, certain kinds of killing no longer even count officially as "killing." Certain kinds of killing we enshrine as rights — and protect by law. When we live this kind of contradiction, why are we surprised at the results?

The Columbine murders will mark my community for years to come. They're a wound felt by the entire country — but I don't think they'll be the last. We live in the most violent century in history. Nothing makes us immune from that violence except a relentless commitment to respect the sanctity of each human life, from womb to natural death. The civility and community we've built in this country are fragile. We're losing them. In examining how and why our culture markets violence, I ask you not to stop with the symptoms. Look deeper. The families in Littleton and throughout the country deserve at least that much.